

Prepare to Drop

by microzombie

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Summary: We all know the story of the Master Chief and his siblings. But when the Spartans weren't there the only defense against the aliens were the soldiers of the UNSC. Miranda is an ODST. A Helljumper. In seven years of war she was beaten and burned but NOT under worked. ODSTs from canon make appearances, including unlisted characters like Melissa McKay and Buck's squad.

## 1. Prologue

HEY THERE! So! I'm Microzombie and I've decided to try my hand at a Halo fanfiction. It's my first time so be gentle./strong/p>If you follow my other stories I apologize. I've been working on them, but this is something I've had stewing for a long time. There's a few more that I'm going to post. I just can't seem to work without these stories, especially this one, coming to you're new...WELCOME. I'll tell you the same thing I tell everyone else. I welcome criticism. Flame will result in a very stern glare at my screen since I can't do anything to you. Perhaps one day...ANYWAY!Here's the story.<p>

I DON'T OWN HALO!

0730 Hours

Lance Corporal Miranda Palmer

Outskirts of New Tenochtitlan, Azteca

14 February, 2547

A Wraith's plasma mortar impacted around fifty meters away, outlining several troopers of the 506th ODST battalion against the ground. The cloudless night made it easier to spot the purple orbs arcing through the sky, and it was that much easier to dodge them. I turned my head away and got lower in my shallow foxhole, trying to dig it deeper

than puddle depth with the top half of an Elite's helmet.

What?

They made good entrenching tools in a pinch. And the dried blood added characterâ€¦ok I just realized how that sounded. I'm not psychotic...at all. I'm just...enthusiastic you could say. But then I guess you could also say that nearly every Marine is enthusiastic when it comes to filling Covies full of holes.

"Dig faster Cracker!"

I turned and glared at the other Helljumper in the foxhole.

"You wanna take a turn Juice than be my guest! It's kind of hard to see when my visor is cracked."

And it was. Holy shit, but was my visor cracked. A spiderweb ran across the entire left side.

"So take it off!"

"I'd rather be half-blind than take shrapnel to the back of my head."

"Fair enough."

Damn right it was fair.

I sure as hell didn't ask to get stuck outside a city digging a foxhole with a dead alien's helmet...well actually I did, but I was uneducated when I made the choice. Totally not my fault. I blame teenage hormones. I was angry when I went infantry after all.

Screw it. Doesn't matter, I'm here now, and I can't change that.

So! Instead of continuing the argument with my battle buddy I went back to digging a deeper hole in the rock hard permafrost that made up Azteca's mountains until the platoon sergeant's voice rang out over the com net.

"Eyes up Helljumpers! Second platoon has xenos in sight! We're gonna remind these fuckers that artillery doesn't scare the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers! Am I right Marines?!"

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant!" forty voices responded at once.

"Mhm...damn right I am." The NCO sounded pleased when he signed off the net. I put down my makeshift shovel and retrieved my M392 DMR from my back. I aimed it downrange and focused it on a pair of rocks that were a likely spot for a Jackal recon squad to pop up. Juice came and lay next to me with his SRS99-AM.

We lay quiet for several moments.

"I got movement." Juice sent me a NAV marker and I shifted my view to it. Two Jackals bearing Carbines were standing on a cliff.

"El-tee, I've got two Jackals on the right flank. Looks like a recon

team. Want me and Juice to take'em?"

There was a pause before my platoon leader responded.

"Go ahead, Cracker, but try and use your DMR. I don't want Juice revealing his position until he has to."

"Roger." A feral grin accompanied the reply and I shifted in the foxhole to a better firing position. Juice scampered to the right to allow me more room.

"I'm taking the one of the right first. If I don't get the one on the left leave him. He isn't worth revealing your position."

Juice's acknowledgement light flashed.

I balanced my rifle on a rock and practiced shifting between the aliens a couple times. I slowly let out my breath as my crosshairs settled on the Jackal's neck. I slowly put pressure on the trigger, and I saw the Jackal's head snap backwards before I heard and felt my rifle's report. I quickly shifted my aim to the left, and fired two rounds into the other Jackal's chest.

As if on cue a hundred Grunts and a quarter that of Brutes leapt from behind rocks and charged our lines.

"Light'em up!" the platoon leader's voice rang out and, in unison, the UNSC lines exploded into noise. A Scorpion tank entrenched on the ridge behind the infantry's lines boomed out a report and the 105mm high explosive round splattered a couple Grunts and sent around a dozen flying.

"Designated Marksman and Snipers! Prioritize officers!"

I shifted my aim off of a Grunt and instead sent three rounds into a Brute's head making him fall over. The ape probably wasn't dead, they were stubborn that way, but he was out of commission. I shifted my aim to a Chieftain and was about to pull the trigger on him when his head exploded and he fell to a white vapor trail.

"Fucking hell Juice! You could have let me have that one!" I snapped as I reloaded. I could hear the smirk in the sniper's voice.

"We're still in competition Cracker. Can't let ya get ahead."

I growled as I rebalanced my rifle on the edge of my foxhole and continuing contributing to the laying waste of the alien banzai charge.

"Alright. DMRs go after Jackals and weapons teams. Snipers keep nailing the officers." Lieutenant Nietzsche's voice came through my radio.

I flashed my acknowledgement light and turned my fire on a Grunt running forward with a Fuel Rod Cannon. His head snapped backwards as my bullet passed through it and he fell forward. Unfortunately for his comrades his hand hit the trigger of the weapon, and the explosion took out two Brutes along with an entire lance of Grunts.

"Those don't count! The Grunt killed them!" Juice shouted as he took the hat off a Brute captain.

"They totally do! He just gets an assist!" I shouted back as I smiled at the banter. Even as I killed two Jackals and another Grunt with a Fuel Rod Cannon the weapons fire began tapering off. Several hundred bodies lay in front of Foxtrot Company and we hadn't even had to call Shortswords for air support. I began to feel very proud of myself.

"Well done Helljumpers. We taught'em what happens when you fuck with the UNS-urk!" The Gunny's voice was cut off by a wet grunt of pain.

"Gunny?!"

"Gunnery Sergeant?!"

" 7 Foxtrot 2-2 do you copy?" the El-tee's voice came through the radio along with those of several other troopers'.

Even as I was about to send a radio call of my own I caught movement behind Juice. My eyes widened and I pulled my M6S and extended my arm towards the blur.

Juice's eyes widened as he seemed to realize something as well, and even as I fired four 12.7mm rounds into the head of the cloaked Elite, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Juice was swinging around his big rifle when I felt something enter my body through my lower back. I was lifted off the ground, and looked down to catch the end of an Elite's Energy Sword being removed from my abdomen.

I fell to the ground on my side.

'Weird...I thought it'd hurt to be stabbed by one of those things...' I idly thought as Juice fired four 14.5mm rounds into a target I couldn't see. He swung his rifle onto his back as the rest of the line exploded into gunfire as my fellow Helljumpers engaged the enemy infiltrators. Juice kneeled next to me and pulled off my battered helmet. I looked up at the night sky as black began encroaching on my vision.

'Funny...I've spent a lot of time up there, but I've never noticed how beautiful it all is before...' were my last thoughts as a Corpsman slid to a stop next to me and unconsciousness overtook me.

\* \* \*

><p>I'm afraid that I'm pretty new at writing combat scenes, so I'd appreciate a quick review. I realize that there wasn't much there to go on...don't expect a badass battle scene worthy of Two Steps From Hell. If you want something like that I highly recommend "The Life" by Casquis. If you haven't read it yet, drop EVERYTHING, and go read it. NOW. I DEMAND IT! Are you still here? Seriously...you're missing out...ok...um...if you're still here I guess you deserve a prize...OH! Here's the next chapter! You can have this!<p>

\*\*So here it is. The first chapter of the rewrite. Tell me what ya think. I need your help on this one to let me know how I'm doing. This was inspired by "The Life" by Casquis. I'm not going to copy him, but I do need your guys help in letting me know how I'm doing. Also all credit goes to Casquis for the inspiration on this.\*\*

\*\*So...here it is. Enjoy.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Manassas<strong>

\*\* Viery Territory\*\*

\*\*Planet Reach.\*\*

\*\* September 1, 2545\*\*

\*\*1830 Hours Zulu.\*\*

Iswallowed as I felt the clamps slam into place on the hull of the ship. I was here. On Reach. About to get the crap kicked out of me. Oh man what had I been thinking?! There was a loud '\_ka-chunk'\_ and a decompression as the airlocks came loose and the atmosphere equalized with that on the outside. A mechanical whine signalled the ramp descending, and the five hundred some odd UNSCDF recruits in the ship with me swallowed slightly. Myself included. Marine boot camp had been infamous for centuries! I picked up my duffel bag from the floor and schooled my face. I put my concerns out of my mind. Best to go into it with confidence after all. The recruit behind me gave a slight shove and I noticed the people in front of me had begun moving. I walked forward and my feet joined the metallic foot falls of the would-be soldiers.

I winced from the cold as I stepped off the troop transport into the howling wind. I looked around and took in my surroundings. I was in a large spaceport. I watched in quiet awe as a \_Charon-class\_ \_frigate flew over.

"It's not even that big of a damned ship! Get yer asses moving!" an Army sergeant snapped. I turned my head back forward and followed the line of recruits. The line came to a stop and I looked ahead and watched it diverge after reaching a group of NCOs. I quietly waited my turn and instead looked at some of the UNSC ships flying overhead. I blinked at a massive \_Marathon\_ class cruiser in the distance. I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned to the recruit behind me and he pointed to my front. I looked forward and a Marine sergeant was looking at me expectantly.

"Sorry, sirâ€|umâ€|?" I averted my eyes in embarrassment and slight fear as he glared at me.

"I'm a staff sergeant. Pay attention. I asked what your name was."

I looked at his eyes.

"Miranda Palmer. From Actium."

He flipped through a clipboard. He pointed towards a large tractor-trailer marked MARINES.

"That's your ride. Sorry about your home, kid."

I was about to respond, but he gestured for me to move to the truck. I jogged over and clambered into the trailer with the rest of the Marine-hopefuls. It was dark. There were no holes in the side besides small slits in the roof, and those were no help. I was near the middle so by the time the truck was full I was pressed between the wall and a few other recruits. The truck started with a roar and I steadied myself on the wall as it jumped forward. I looked around and the other recruits seemed just as nervous as me. I began sweating. It was sweltering in the truck after all despite the temperature outside. But the other recruits didn't seem to have problems with the heat. Were they from tropical colonies or something? I looked at the nearest wall and then over my shoulder. Another girl was behind me. Green eyes, blond hair. A little taller than me. In another time and place I would have been slightly jealous of her looks, but I just averted my eyes back to front. The male in front of me was awfully close, and the roof wasn't all that high either.

In fact the entire truck seemed to be getting smaller.

I bit my lip and my breathing became labored. I jumped as I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and the girl was looking at me with concerned eyes.

"Hey? Are you ok?"

I swallowed and nodded.

"I just don't do well in tight spaces."

The girl smiled.

"Compared to what we're about to go through, I think claustrophobia is the least of your problems."

I actually laughed a little and my breathing steadied. The girl stuck out her hand.

"Charlotte Xavier."

"Miranda Palmer." I shook it. Then quirked an eyebrow.

"Charlie Xavier? Like in X-Men?"

Charlotte rolled her eyes.

"Yes like in X-Men. Go ahead and get it out of your system."

I snickered and then looked to my right and saw a man in his mid-twenties looking at me curiously.

"What the hell are X-Men?"

I frowned at him.

"You know? The super-heroes?"

"I like super-heroes stuff, and I've never heard of themâ€¦"

Charlotte frowned now.

"Wolverine? Rogue? Cyclops?"

He made an 'ah' expression.

"Oh you mean that twenty-first century thing! What is with people who like old stuff?"

I frowned even deeper.

"I'm not into old stuff. I'm just into historyâ€¦"

The male recruit snickered.

"So you're a nerd?"

I was about to retort when the driver slammed on the breaks. I just about knocked over the person in front of me and only stopped myself from falling over because Charlie grabbed the collar of my shirt.

I coughed as I was choked, but I was drowned out by the complaints and groans from my fellow recruits. I heard the locks slide out of place on the doors and the large doors were opened at the rear of the trailer.

"Out! Out! Now! Move! Fall in!"

There was a slight amount of chaos in the trucks as recruits either jumped out of the trailer or were dragged by what I could only assume was an instructor. I was jostled towards the rear and jumped out. I was shoved towards a smattering of recruits who were being forced into a line by another pair of instructors.

"Fall in!" I was shoved again, and I jogged over before joining the end of the line. I dropped my bag at my feet like the rest of the recruits and stood up straight at some approximation of attention. Several other tractor trailers were being emptied of recruits, and it was around ten minutes before the whole class was standing in the dark. Shivering in their clothes from the cold, and the gazes of their instructors.

"Attention, dumbshits!"

I turned my head towards a man standing on a raised platform with a bullhorn. He was broad across the shoulders, but was actually on the short side. His rusty brown eyes bored into us, and I felt as if he was trying to suck out my soul with his eyes. A scarred over burn marred the left side of his head, and a portion of his hair was missing from the crew cut.

"Welcome to Camp Lima Delta! It's a boring name, but you better learn to love it because this beautiful piece of UEG rock is going to be your home for the next few months!"

I shifted my eyes around, and the landscape looked to be anything but

beautiful. Craggy outcroppings were occasionally interrupted by skimpy patches of grass. In fact the tundra looked absolutely unattractive. The area we were in was fenced in by barbed wire, and had several dozen buildings lit up by floodlights. Concrete had replaced tundra here.

"Now! You may think that since you're here to become Marines, you think that gives you the title of recruit. Wrong! My recruits are lower than whale shit, but you! Why...you aren't even worthy of shining their boots! Let alone the privilege of mine! As of now, you are simply punkasses! Am I understood, punkasses?!"

There was no answer.

"Am I understood?!"

"Yes, sir!" A few voices sounded. The instructor turned his withering gaze on the recruit...I mean...punkass closest to him, I noticed it was the male recruit from the trailer, and was calm, instead of screaming like I expected.

"What's your name?"

The punkass swallowed.

"William Sluttz."

"Sluttz? Wow you musta been named for your momma. Punkass Slutz, I am a United Nations Space Command Marine Corps Master Sergeant, and you will address me as such! Understood!"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

The Master Sergeant nodded.

"Excellent! You understand English, Punkass! You!" The instructor pointed to me. I almost jumped in fright.

"Name?"

"Miranda Palmer, Master Sergeant."

"Louder! Not even a divine individual such as myself could turn a pussy into a tiger! You wanna be a Marine? Prove it!"

I managed to keep my voice from trembling as I raised my voice slightly.

"Miranda Palmer, Master Sergeant!"

He nodded curtly.

"Very well, Punkass Palmer! See the Staff Sergeant over there?" the Master Sergeant pointed to a tall blonde man that wasn't nearly as well built as the Master Sergeant.

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

"That is Staff Sergeant Kirby. He's going to lead you Punkasses to a place where you can be made to look presentable. Do you think up in



that hollow skull of yours that you can follow him without getting lost."

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

"Very well, Punkass Palmer! Punkasses! Follow Palmer here! Leave your trash here!" I left my dufflebag where it was and began walking to where Kirby was standing.

"Who the fuck said to walk Palmer! You're not getting any younger!" Kirby raised an eyebrow. I began to jog, and kept going past Kirby when he gestured to do so. Kirby began jogging around the middle of the line.

"See that big building Palmer? Guide on to it!"

I turned towards it and I heard the line shift behind me.

"Stop there!"

I stopped in my tracks.

"Look over here Punkasses!" We all turned towards Kirby.

"Form four ranks of thirty! Work it out, now!" Kirby centered himself in front of us, and it took a good ten minutes before we were in something resembling a formation. I was somewhere in the third rank.

"Alright, I guess that's the best that can be expected of a bunch of brain-dead chimps." Kirby jerked the first punkass in line towards the door.

"First rank! Line up behindâ€|" he turned to the trainee by the door. The female trainee had an English accent.

"Sarah Palmer, Staff Sergeant!"

"Well, I'll be damned! Any relation to Punkass Miranda Palmer?"

"None, Staff Sergeant!"

Kirby looked between the two of us.

"Well shit. Punkass Sarah Palmer! You are a punkass of the limey variety so you are now simply Punkass Limey. Punkass Miranda Palmer, you are a punkass of the rich variety, and therefore are now Punkass Yuppie! Understood?"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant!" Sarah chorused along with me.

"Limey! Step inside the door and receive your gift bag! I want the first rank to follow after her!"

Another chorus, of "Yes, Staff Sergeant"'s caused Kirby to nod in satisfaction before stepping backwards. Sarah stepped inside the door, followed by the rest of the trainees. I was actually genuinely curious as to what was inside.

I got my wish to know around twenty minutes later, when I stepped inside and kept face to face with a room full of mirrors and chairs.

I was gestured towards an empty one by a man in a white smock and I sat down in the chair which was covered in other people's hair. I'd actually dreaded this part. I liked my hair—it made me feel fuzzy inside when I brushed it...

The barber, I use that term loosely here people, moved my head and I stared into my dark green eyes and pale anglo-saxon features, as pieces of black hair began falling off my head. Around two minutes later I had an inch of hair on top of my head and the rest of it was white walls.

"Move out of the far door, punkass." So the barber was in on it too. He gestured to an open door at the far end. I stood and began walking that way while running my hand through what was left of my hair. I was so busy mourning my bangs that I nearly ran into someone. I looked up and a line of people in their late-teens and early twenties were receiving a pair of boots, and several items of clothing in a camouflage pattern. Plus a duffel bag filled with what I assumed was more clothing than a underwear, a pair of pants, and uniform jacket. I took mine, and slung my bag over my shoulder. A man wearing corporal's stripes gestured to a room labelled \_females\_. I pushed open the door and was greeted by a woman wearing camouflage fatigues bearing the name \_Forsythe\_. \_She\_ had the stripes of a staff sergeant and I didn't. A few other female trainees were getting changed into their uniforms.

"Get changed into something decent punkass. You look absolutely terrible in those expensive clothes of yours." The drill instructors tone was derisive.

\_What the hell did I do? Not my fault my parents have...\_had...money.\_

I blinked away a few tears at the thought of my mother and father...and younger sister and brother. I refused to allow the drill instructor and other trainees to see me cry. I stripped down to my underwear and then hesitated.

"Take it off Yuppie, no one here has a dick." the drill instructor fixed me with an icy gaze and I didn't hesitate for a moment before taking off my underwear and looking through the clothes I'd been issued.

All of the underwear I changed into was olive drab. I pulled on tan digital camouflaged pants, and then a olive drab muscle shirt. Socks, olive drab again, and then the black boots. Finally was the long sleeved uniform jacket. There was no insignia on it.

\_They really want to drive it home that we're not worth a damn, huh? How come \_she\_ gets to have hair and \_\_we don't\_.\_

"Alright, Yuppie, far door, and you'll see where to go."

"Thank you, Staff Sergeant."

The instructor didn't respond as I picked up my equipment bag and

walked out the door. I came into a hallway. Other trainees were standing on either wall with their bags at their feet. Females on one side, males on the other.

"Pick a spot, Punkass." Kirby was standing at the head of the hallway in a parade rest position.

I looked around, and didn't see Charlie, so I stood next to the closest familiar person.

Sarah Palmer looked at me out of the corner of her eye before turning her gaze back forward.

Trainees filtered in from the changing rooms. Eventually Charlie came out and gave me a nod before she went and stood next to a blonde haired, blue eyed, female trainee with faintly Slavic features. Last to come out of the changing rooms were Forsythe and a male Staff Sergeant bearing the name Buck.

"Females! Face Staff Sergeant Forsythe!" Kirby's voice rang out. I turned to face Forsythe. Forsythe's voice rang out next.

"Let's go Punkasses! Bring your shit!"

I picked up my bag before following Sarah when she began moving. We turned a few corners and walked through identical hallways before exiting the building to go outside. We kept going for a few hundred meters and left the fenced in area. After walking for around twenty minutes we came upon another fenced in area, but this one was much less clean. The concrete sidewalks were still present, but mud was everywhere else they weren't. And the modern buildings were missing. In their place were early twentieth-century looking barracks. They looked like someone had cut a can down the middle and placed both halves on their sides. You know? The stereotypical military barracks? Yeah. It's the one you're thinking of. Yes the ones back on the main garrison were much nicer. But...basic training is supposed to suck I suppose.

"Halt!" Forsythe's voice rang out, as did Kirby's from somewhere behind me. I guess the males were following us.

"Form four ranks of thirty Punkasses!" Kirby's voice rang out and we all scrambled to get into a formation. I ended up losing track of Sarah and stood in the third rank next to a pair of male trainees I hadn't met yet.

We stood quietly for a few moments until the Master Sergeant from earlier stepped out of a building and walked over with a purpose. He appeared to be having a casual conversation with Kirby before he turned to us and raised an eyebrow.

"Well. You now resemble something close to a military unit. Be advised punkasses. You are no long civilians. You are subject to orders by your superior officers as members of the United Nations Space Command Defense Force. You are not yet Marines, but it is the responsibility of this instructor cadre to make you Marines by the end of this training cycle. And we will do so if we have to drag you along kicking and screaming. Punkasses. From this moment forward you are not just a mob. You are a unit. You eat, drink, shit, and sleep together. There are no arguments in that. Matter of fact? There are

no arguments in anything. Wanna go against an order? Go right ahead. The rest of the Punkasses will wave when you walk down Washout Lane."

The Master Sergeant indicated a well traveled dirt trail leading to a gate. It was surrounded by a chain link fence. First rank one step forward!"

The first rank took a tentative step forward and their alignment got worse than before.

"You are designated First Platoon of Alpha Company. Barracks Building 72. Fall in on Staff Sergeant Stag." First platoon formed a line in front of a black Staff Sergeant and the man lead them away from the formation.

"Second Rank, you are designated Second Platoon of Alpha Company. Barracks Building 73. Fall in on Staff Sergeant Kirby."

Second platoon fell in on Kirby and the man, once again, led them away.

"Third Rank, you are now designated Third Platoon of Alpha Company. Barracks Buildings 92. Fall in on Staff Sergeant Forsythe."

I stepped forward with everyone in my platoon and formed a line in front of Forsythe.

"Right, face!" the Marine barked.

I lamely turned right along with the rest of the platoon while Forsythe watched appraisingly.

"Step off with your left foot boys and girls!"

"Forwarrrrrd, march!"

I swung my left foot forward and heard a crash of boots as everyone else did so. I inwardly smiled.

Maybe this won't be so hard.

That theory was blown to smithereens around thirty seconds into the march, as the footsteps became disjointed.

"Platoon! Halt!"

Every trainee in the platoon stopped at a different time.

"When I say left, your left foot should be hitting the ground. Same thing for right foot. Understood?"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant!" the platoon chorused.

"Alright, Punkasses let's see what you got. Forward, march!"

I swung my left foot forward.

"Left!" My left foot hit the ground.

"Left!" the marching was better this time around.

"What the hell is that! Jesus, how in the fuck did you dumbshits find your way off the damn transport with this kind of coordination?!" but it wasn't good enough for Forsythe apparentlyâ€|

"Platoon, halt!"

Another disjointed stop.

"About, face!"

We all lamely turned again and came face to wall with a soda can barracks marked with the numbers 92.

"Welcome home, Punkasses!" Forsythe's voice echoed through my ears as I looked at my home for the next 90 days.

"About face!"

We turned back to the Staff Sergeant and she looked at us appraisingly one more time.

"You'll find supplies to write your families in the lockers next to your rack. Lights out at 2200! Dismissed!"

Forsythe pivoted on her heel and marched away. I drifted inside the barracks with the rest of my platoon, and grabbed the first available bunk. There were around twenty of them in the barracks. Concrete floors were underneath them and two doored locker was on either side of each. As I laid my duffle on my mattress I heard a voice.

"Why are you following me?"

I looked up to the top bunk and Sarah Palmer was lying down in her uniform, but had me fixed with a glare.

"I'm not, I just grabbed the first available rackâ€|what's with the hostility?" I frowned at the English-accented woman.

"I got singled out because of youâ€|"

I growled at the girl.

"Oh, I apologize for my mom and dad having gotten married. I shall make every effort to make it up to her highness Queen Limeyâ€|"

Sarah growled back and sat up in her rack. I tensed and got ready for her to swing.

"Alright, there's no need for for that. Sarah, it's not Miranda's fault. Miranda, leave her nickname alone." a black haired woman walked up. She had green eyes. We could have been sisters.

'\_Especially since we have the same damned haircut!'\_

"I'm sorry, who're you?" I raised an eyebrow defensively. The woman smirked at me in a way that didn't quite seem arrogant, but instead

had a quiet confidence about it.

"I'm Melissa McKay. Now come on boys and girls! We need to get some rest for tomorrow!"

As if to emphasize McKay's statement, the lights went out in the barracks.

'\_Well alright then. Day one...over...'\_ I thought as I stripped off to my underwear and got under the covers of my rack. I fell asleep almost before I hit the pillow.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Questions? Comments? Concerns?<strong>

### 3. Day One

**\*\*This chapter is dedicated to all of those we lost in the final chapters of Casquis' "The Life"\*\***

**\*\*Though my heart is broken we shall never forget...uh...never mind spoilers...\*\***

**\*\*Haha, yeah people "The Life" is over, so I'll be diving head first into this now. Tell me how I'm doing so far.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Camp Lima Delta, Viery Territory,  
<strong>**\*\*Reach\*\***

**\*\*September 2, 2545\*\***

**\*\*0530 Hours Zulu.\*\***

**\*\*Recruit Trainee Miranda Palmer\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>A shrill alarm going off made my eyes shoot open and I rolled out of bed. My head bounced off the concrete and I yelped in pain. I then felt a sudden weight on my back that knocked the wind out of me.<p>

"Ah shit..." An English accented voice murmured before getting off my back. I growl at Sarah Palmer's retreating back before standing up myself and shambling over to the foot of my bunk. I see all of the other trainees are standing at some rough form of attention. I take this up as well, as I use my peripherals to scan my surroundings. Buck is standing at the far end of the barracks, Forsythe is next to the door. She has a megaphone in her hand, so I assume that's what the siren was. The Master Sergeant from last night enters the barracks and he just stands at parade rest while he examines us.

My brain is telling me to yawn, but I decide that if I do so, I'll get told to rub myself down in BBQ and have dinner with a grizzly bear. The Master Sergeant walks forward, his boots clicking idly on the concrete floors. When he spoke he didn't need to yell. His

confident voice rang through the building without him having to try.

"In the beginning there was naught but darkness. Then God said, let there be light. Within this light, God created this great galaxy of ours. He started with Earth. He divided this Earth between land and sea, and these He filled with all sorts of creatures. Large and small. Beautiful and ugly. The dim, dumb, slimy creatures of the ocean, God called sailors. And He dressed them accordingly."

The Master Sergeant passed me and I found myself captivated by this speech of his.

"The flighty creatures of the air, He called airmen, and on these he put clothing that were ruffled and too flimsy to be of any use on a battlefield. The lower creatures of the land, God called soldiers. He gave them trousers too baggy, and covers too small. And pockets to keep their hands warm."

The Master Sergeant examined each trainee he walked past.

"And on the seventh day, as you should know if your mommas raised you right, God rested."

The Master Sergeant pivoted 180 degrees and began walking up the other side of the barracks.

"And on the eighth day, when God got up for PT he gazed down upon Earth and was \_not happy!\_"

The Master Sergeant stopped in front of a trainee and the young man started sweating as the Marine seemed to be scrutinizing him down to his hair follicles. The Master Sergeant continued speaking as he examined the trainee.

"So He thought about His labors, and in His infinite wisdom, God created a divine creature to carry out his will. And this creature, He called a Marine."

The Master Sergeant then turned and continued walking up the barracks.

"And these Marines, whom God created in his own image, were to be of the air, the land, and the seas. He gave them sturdy, practical, uniforms so that they may wage war against the forces of Satan and evil. He gave them evening and dress uniforms so that they might score on Saturday night, and to impress the living hell out of everybody. And at the end of the eighth day, God looked down upon Earth, and saw that it was good. But was God happy? No! Because in the middle of his labors he'd forgotten one very important thing. He did not have a Marine uniform. ," the Master Sergeant pivoted again and stood next to Forsythe.

"But he thought about it for a while, and satisfied himself in knowing that, not everybody can be a Marine. Boys and girls this puts me one step above God, because I \_am a Marine!\_"

I simply stared straight ahead. I didn't believe in some bearded dude up in the sky, but I gotta admit, that speech was pretty friggin' awesome.

"Now then I may be one step above God, but I need a Moses. That is where Gunnery Sergeant Buck, and Staff Sergeant Forsythe come in. They will carry my commandments to you. And you will follow them. Or you will suffer eternal damnation. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

The Master Sergeant nods.

"Well alright then. I'll leave them here to lead you to the promised land then. Buck! Take'em out!"

The Master Sergeant turns and walks out. Buck's voice, the first time I've heard it, rings out through the building.

"Five minutes! Be in uniform and in formation outside in five minutes!"

Buck and Forsythe walk out of the barracks and I turn and open the bag I'd been issued the night before. I quickly change my underwear before pulling on a uniform that's identical to the one the night before. I run my hand through my hair expecting to have to brush it, but the one inch of hair that's still there is fine by itself. I jog outside and fall into four ranks with the rest of the trainees. Buck is standing at the front and Forsythe at the back. Once we're all outside, with thirty seconds to spare I might add, Buck speaks.

"Good morning, Punkasses!"

A few mumbled responses.

"I said good morning, Punkasses!"

"Good morning, Gunnery Sergeant!" Third Platoon chorused. Buck gestured to Forsythe and she walked forward next to him.

"Pay attention Punkasses! We're only doing this once! Staff Sergeant Forsythe here is going to show you the proper position of attention and show you how to properly execute a facing movement."

Buck turned to Forsythe.

"Individual! Attention!"

Forsythe straightened her back and put her hands even with the seam of her pants. Buck stood to her side.

"This is the position of attention. Notice the hands and knees. Her hands are cupped, but not closed tight. Her thumbs are even with the seams of her trousers. The knees are not locked. Locked knees will result in you falling into unconsciousness and everyone else laughing at your dumbass."

Buck pointed to Forsythe's feet.

"The heels of your footwear are to be together, and there will be a forty-five degree angle formed by your feet."



Buck backed up and centered himself on us.

"Do not anticipate the command! The preparatory order is to inform you of the coming command."

"Platoon! Atten-\_shun!\_"

There was a crash of boots as the platoon came to attention. Buck turned to Forsythe.

"Individual, inspect the platoon."

Forsythe walked forward and began walking in between us. Once in a while she stuck her foot in between someone's feet and told them to either open or close them further. She walked to me. The drill instructor pointed to my hands.

"Your hands are too tight Palmer. Just cup them like this." She showed me a fist that was rather loose. I loosened my hands and moved my thumbs to make sure they were along the seams of my pants. Forsythe nodded and walked further down the line. Buck came behind her and did the same thing she did. Correcting stances. No insults. Just teaching. Before too long they were back at the front. Buck spoke again.

"Pay attention! Individual! Right face by the numbers! One!"

Forsythe pivoted to the right but didn't complete the movement. Her left heel was still in the air, while her right foot was flat against the ground.

"Two!"

Her left foot came even with the right and she was back at attention.

"Platoon! Right face by the numbers! One!"

We all pivoted, but this wasn't as easy as attention. Several people lost their balance, but there were no insults as they righted themselves.

"Two!"

"Staff Sergeant, correct them as we go. Platoon! Right face by the numbers!"

\* \* \*

><p>And that's how it went. Every time we moved, every time we went to a different location we would learn something. The insults were a constant at all times except when we were being instructed. I was actually surprised. We weren't learning combat. We were learning the basics. And by basics I mean classroom instruction. How to align ourselves. How we were to cross roads and rivers without exposing the size of our group. We didn't even have weapons. We started each day by getting a new piece of gear. The first was the green shin guards and knee pads of the Marine armor. Then came the pauldrons. And then finally the torso plate. Every day we looked more like the Marines we

aspired to be.<p>

And every week there were less of us. Every day when we returned to the barracks one or two would be seen packing their bag and they would walk down Washout Lane in their civilian clothes. Their BDUs would be left on their bed neatly folded. The boots would be shined to a mirror shine, and be left with their uniform. They stayed there until the quartermaster unit would come and pick them up. No sign of our fellow punkass would be left.

And now here we were. Morning formation.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Lima Delta, Viery Territory, Reach<strong>

\*\*September 15, 2545\*\*

\*\*0730 Hours Zulu\*\*

\*\*Recruit Trainee Miranda Palmer\*\*

I adjusted my torso plate again. For the last week I could barely breathe in the damned thing.

"The hip straps are too tight Yuppie." Sarah Palmer pointed out as she strapped on her shoulder pauldrons. That was another thing. As Third Platoon got smaller and smaller it became necessary to put aside our bullshit and work together. A recruit that wasn't up to par made the whole unit weaker. I pulled on the strap and adjusted the length. I sighed in relief. I nodded to Sarah and she nodded back.

I picked up my rucksack and jogged outside to join the formation. Only Forsythe was out front, so Buck must have had business or something. I joined the formation and came to attention, waiting for Forsythe to start the day's instruction. A large green crate around six feet tall is behind her, marked with the UNSC eagle on a sliding door like you'd see on an old garage.

"Alright, Punkasses! Today you're going to get the thing that every Marine loves."

I just stared straight ahead. Forsythe reached down and slid open the door to reveal around two dozen rifles, and a small screen. She reached inside and pulled one out.

"Punkasses, this is the MA5B Individual Combat Weapon System. She has a sixty round magazine and fires at a rate of 900 rounds per minute. You will learn to love this lady more than anything. First rank! Step forward and receive your weapon!"

One by one the trainees stepped up and retrieved an MA5 from the crate. I walked up and wrapped my hand around the top of the boxy looking rifle. I pressed my right thumb to a scanner and my picture appeared on the screen. Along with some with some text saying some mumbo jumbo about me checking out this rifle and being obligated by law, blah blah blah.

"Fingers off the triggers, Punkasses! Always treat your weapon as if it is loaded, and there will be no accidents!" Forsythe held her MA5

with one hand. I took my place back in the formation and awkwardly held my rifle. Buck came striding up with an MA5 of his own.

"Boys and girls, today, we're gonna start with the good stuff. Your allotted time on the firing ranges have come. You wanna be Marines, you gotta learn the old maxim. Every Marine is a rifleman. You will not leave Camp Lima Delta without being able to shoot a flea off of a dog's ass, understood!"

"Yes, Gunnery Sergeant!"

Buck wrapped his hand around the grip of his MA5 and held it diagonally across his chest, pointed upwards.

"This is port arms. When we are marching you will hold your weapon at port arms, unless instructed otherwise!"

There was the clank of metal as the platoon brought their rifles to the correct position.

"Platoon! Right, face!"

Clatter of boots.

"Forward, march!"

\* \* \*

><p>Single gun shots cracked through the air as my platoon gathered around Staff Sergeant Forsythe. We all took a knee, while Forsythe stayed standing.<p>

"Boys and girls, let me start off by saying. The weapon in your hands is a honed machine of death. If you shoot something with it, that thing will die. That means the first time I see one of you stupid shits pointing your weapon at another recruit, I will beat your ass to a pulp before dragging you down Washout Lane by the mangled and scorched remains of your face!" Forsythe glared at us with all of the drill instructor prowess we knew she had. There was collective gulp as the recruits took in the fire in Forsythe's eyes. It wouldn't be the first time the instructors slapped around a recruit for being dumb. In fact quite a few people had gotten knocked out over our time here. Seeing that we were sufficiently cowed, Forsythe pulled her MA5 from her back and showed it to us.

"The MA5B is rather simple. You put the magazine in, you pull back the charging handle, and then you squeeze the trigger. The gun does the rest. You will find user manuals on the HUDs of your helmets."

There was some murmuring. We didn't have helmets.

"Quite obviously you don't have helmets yet. Don't get to worryin' you'll be issued them soon enough. Now, you want to keep your arm away from the right side, if that charging handle catches your hand you'll be bitching about it for weeksâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>I lay in a prone position on a concrete slab. In front of me was

an assortment of burnt out vehicles and UNSC barricades. I was breathing steadily as I stared down the iron sights of my MA5. There was a crosshair in front of me from my newly assigned helmet, but it wasn't much use other than letting me know which way my weapon should be facing. It was completely stationary, if you didn't catch my meaning. There were muffled gunshots from the other recruits, but they were slightly muted by my helmet's built in hearing protection.<p>

'\_Breathe steady. Squeeze the trigger on exhale. Don't pull, squeeze.'\_ Forsythe's words were in my mind as I waited for the first target to appear. A buzzer sounded and a holographic image of an Elite appeared around fifty feet from me, behind a Warthog which was wrecked beyond repair. It was one of the ones in blue armor. I just stared at it for a second as my mind went back to Actium.

'\_Mom! '\_

'\_Run! '\_

'\_Evac is at the spaceport! '\_

'\_The Marines are retreating! '\_

"Fire your damned weapon, Yuppie!" Forsythe's voice tore me from my thoughts and I jerked the trigger on my rifle. The shot went off course and struck the ground.

"Great, you killed some earthworms." Forsythe was degrading. I very nearly snapped back, but all that would accomplish is me getting a boot between my shoulder blades, so I went back to aiming down my sights at the Elite.

'\_Shoot for center of mass. Don't go for the movie bullshit of headshots. A hit to the chest will put your target on his back. That's all you need to do.' \_

With the instructions in mind once again I exhaled and squeezed the trigger slowly. A single round left the muzzle of my rifle and impacted the Elite square in the chest. I smiled slightly as the hologram shimmered before coming back, indicating it wasn't dead yet. I fired two more carefully aimed shots at the Elite. They both impacted, and the image shimmered and died. I heard the dirt crunch as Forsythe walked away.

"That wasn't bad Miranda."

I looked to my right and Melissa McKay was lying on a prone position as well, her MA5 secure in her shoulder as she fired round after round into her targets. The yellow stripes of a trainee squad leader were on her shoulders. I frowned at McKay.

"I froze up."

McKay nodded as she sent four rounds into a grunt.

"You did, and I'm not going to pry. Just keep shooting. Quick, Buck is looking over here."

I quickly looked back forward and fired four shots into a Jackal hologram as the sun rose higher into the sky.

\* \* \*

><p>My five round burst hit a grunt in the chest and I stopped to reload.<p>

"Yuppie, take a look at this."

I turned and looked over my shoulder to see Buck holding out a different rifle than the one I had now. I safed my weapon and set it down before turning to Buck. He held the weapon at port arms.

"This is an M392 DMR. That's designated marksman's rifle. We give these out to grunts who are right about in the middle between your average rifleman and a sniper. It's not fully automatic like that MA5 there, but it has a hell of a lot more punch per shot, and the accuracy can't even be compared. Try it on for size."

Buck gestured for me to take the rifle, which I did also taking some proffered magazines afterward.

"Now that MA5 has a sixty round magazine. You only have fifteen with that M392. So you gotta make them count."

I nodded and laid back down in a prone position. I was very aware of Buck watching over my shoulder. I settled my cheek on the pad on the butt stock of the DMR. I lined up my eye with the small optic on top of the rifle. The buzzer sounded and a Grunt appeared in front of me. I aimed for its chest, but when I squeezed the trigger the rifle drifted to the right. The recoil on this thingâ€¦|

>"Like I said. Hell of a lot more punch. Try it again." Buck seemed amused and I growled inside my head before turning back to the range. An Elite appeared in front of me and I fired three rounds at it, missing twice. I shifted to a Jackal and fired one shot into its chest before moving to a Grunt. This time I fired three shots into the hologram, all of them center of mass, exactly where I aimed. Buck grunted before walking further down the firing line.<p>

"Well alright then, Yuppie."

I frowned at the nickname and looked to my right. Melissa was grinning at me.

"What?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I think that's the closest thing you're going to get to a compliment from Buck."

I scoffed and looked back towards the range.

"Right. Because the DIs are capable of compliments."

"Oh, have I offended your sensitive rich-bitch sensibilities, Punkass?"

I almost groaned out loud at the sound of Staff Sergeant Forsythe's voice. Instead I got up and came to attention.

"No, Staff Sergeant!"

"Then why are you complaining about my manner?"

I knew that making excuses would make it worse.

"No excuse, Staff Sergeant!"

Forsythe stepped forward and shoved me.

"Oh, no! Please tell me what is wrong Punkass! Did I defile you in some way Yuppie?"

"No, Staff Sergeant!"

"Perhaps you want to go crying to mommy and daddy!"

I tensed and quickly moved my foot backwards before beginning to draw my arm backwards, but was on my back before I finished my wind up for a punch. Forsythe was suddenly in my face as a wave of pain exploded from my nose. She seemed amused, impressed, and pissed off all at the same time. It seemed to be a trait unique to the DIs.

"Nice try, Yuppie."

Then I felt my eyes roll back up in my head as I fell into blissful unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>So I'm in the market for a beta, and I was wondering if any of you would be interested? PM me if so. And I'm also looking for a cover. Another chapter is coming your way right now.<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>P.S.-<strong>\*\*Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, or if you're atheist, have nice day! Whatever you're doing have a good time doing it you sexy fuckers!\*\*

#### 4. Close Quarters Battle

**\*\*Lima Delta, Viery Territory, Reach\*\***

**\*\*September 16, 2545\*\***

**\*\*0930 Hours Zulu\*\***

**\*\*Recruit Trainee Miranda Palmer\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>The first thing I saw was the bottom of a bunk when my eyes fluttered open. I groaned and was met with laughter. A black man around a year older than me sat on my bed.<p>

"You alive in there, Miranda?"

I tried to respond in the affirmative, but settled for groaning

instead.

"Yeah. Well you tried to hit a DI. That's what happens."

I groaned again.

"And Forsythe is the CQC instructor, so that makes it doubly stupidâ€¦"

"Shut up, Jonesy." I moved my hand to my head in an effort to ease the ache. Recruit Trainee Jones Johnson was a matter of confusion for me. On the one hand he was a smart ass of epic proportions. On the other hand...actually...nope...smart ass about sums it up. Jonesy came from Meridian. Apparently growing up in one of the UNSC's most impoverished planets made it a requirement to know some old genre of music called blues. I'd never much been one for music, but Jonesy could sing. Really sing. I'd once wondered why he'd joined the Marines. But one story about a bad night at the casino had cleared that up. The sarcastic boy wonder was running from his gambling debts.

I ran my hand across my face and winced as I hit a large welt above my right eye. A groan escaped my mouth as I forced my legs to move off of the bed. When my feet touched the floor I realized someone had removed my boots. I looked down and my uniform coat was gone as well. I looked around for my clothing and found my coat hanging next to my head.

"What time is it?" I slid my arms into my coat and then glared at my boots for being out of arm's reach.

"Girl, you were knocked out for a whole day. It's Sunday morning."

I sighed and felt a bit of satisfaction. Everyone on base, even those of us who happened to be lower than Grunt shit, got every other Sunday off. Just a day to do whatever. Hell you could even leave base and go wherever you wanted. Just be prepared to either be mauled by a giant bear. Since...you know Lima Delta was literally two hundred miles from the nearest form of civilization. And that was just a convenience store. It was like going to Alice Springs in Australia back on Earth. You drive for hours and hours to find a whole lot of nothing and all it is, is a big letdown. And then the kangaroos don't knock you on your ass for being out of base past taps.

I balanced myself on my rack and slowly stood. Jonesy appeared to be ready to catch me so I gave him an irritated look.

"What?" the Marine-hopeful frowned and raised his eyebrows.

"I'm fine." I glared at him past the black and white spots dancing in my eyes. The man shrugged and backed off, holding his hands in the air.

"Alrightâ€¦"

I grabbed my utility cap off a small hook inside my locker and walked towards the door. Jonesy was right behind me.

"You ok on your own. The doc said you might have a concussion."

I turned and looked at him.

"I'm good Jonesy."

"If you have a seizure I reserve the right to say I told you so."

I smirked and let some amusement show in my eyes.

"You go right ahead. Now it's Sunday, you have God Patrol."

Jonesy shoved my right shoulder in return and I smirked.

"You should go to church sometime." Jonesy remarked as we walked on the concrete pads set just above Lima Delta's eternal puddles of mud.

"Why? You believers keep changing your story. If God only created Earth like seven thousand years ago then where did all the dinosaur bones come from?"

Jonesy groaned.

"It's not like atheists have an explanation ever since the big bang theory was disproved...and you like Nickelback and, just as it has been for the last five and a half centuries, that invalidates your point."

I scoffed and jerked my head towards the base cafeteria.

"I'm heading to the DFAC. So you go get your Jesus, I'm gonna go get my delicious military food."

Jonesy rolled his eyes and made a noncommittal noise.

"Enjoy your crackers and washed out music."

I proudly stuck my middle finger in the ai and turned right as Jonesy turned left to head for the chapel.

Just as I began to smell the food I heard dull \_thumps\_ coming from behind the MCX. I walked behind the building and found a PT area. It appeared to be geared towards boxing as there were several sandpits cut from the concrete and some punching bags hanging from stands that were screwed into the ground. A small shed was in the corner of the fenced in area. There was only one person in the area. Staff Sergeant Astrid Forsythe was wearing a PT uniform and had wrapped her hands in boxing tape. The dull thumps I'd heard were her fists hitting a punching bag like rounds from a tank cannon. She had a pair of headphones on and didn't notice me, so I simply watched for a minute. I took in her movements. How her feet moved when she threw a punch, and how her weight shifted as a result. Of course the most noticeable things was the dust coming off of the bag every time the seemingly rocket-powered fists impacted it. I leaned on the wall and a quick step back Forsythe brought her leg up and her steel-toed boot broke the side of the bag open. My jaw went slack. I'd wanted to fight this woman?!

"Enjoying the show, Palmer?"

I shook myself out of my thoughts and Forsythe had an amused smirk on



her face that she had caught me staring. Using my shoulder, I pushed myself off the wall and stood at parade rest.

"Er, sorry Staff Sergeant. I just heard noises and got curious."

Forsythe sniffed and nodded as she dragged another bag out of a small shed and brought it over to her station.

Standing it on end, she turned to me.

"Gimme an assist here."

I walked over and grabbed low on the bag as Forsythe did the same. As I held the bag up she hooked the chain onto the stand and then stood back slightly. She appeared to think for a moment before smirking and looking at me.

"Showing the right hook of yours again."

Returning to parade rest I let my face show a bit of confusion.

"Staff Sergeant?"

Forsythe motioned to the bag.

"Show me what ya got, Palmer. You had the balls to swing on me, I wanna see if you're all bark and no bite."

I tentatively stepped in front of the bag and spread my feet and balled up my fists before putting them up next to my face. Forsythe watched with a critical eye.

"Your feet are too wide apart. Lower your fists just a tad."

I adjusted until Forsythe was satisfied. I went in for a jab.

"Stop."

My fist stopped inches from the bag.

"You'll break your fingers like that Palmer. Do it like position of attention. Don't clench them up, cup them firmly."

I nodded and took my stance again. This time when I went in for a jab Forsythe didn't say anything. My fist impacted the bag and...had absolutely zero effect. I stopped and looked at Forsythe. The DI raised an eyebrow.

"Why the fuck you stop? Keep going, Yuppie."

A tinge of anger ran through me at the irritating nickname and I turned on the bag again. I threw another jab and the bag moved slightly.

"Jesus, maybe we should send you to the front right now. You could make the Covies die of laughter."

I forced the anger down and hit the bag again, this time twice. The bag shifted and swung on its chain.

"Damn, no wonder I knocked you on your ass. You ain't nothin' besides mouth. To bad you can't pay your way into the Marines."

I growled and I swear a tinge of red was showing on my vision. My right fist slammed into the bag like a speeding truck and it rocked backwards before slamming into its stand with a metallic \_clang\_. As it swung back towards me I threw my weight forwards and threw my left hand into the bag. It rocked backwards again, but I didn't give it a break as I slid forward again and hit it twice in as many seconds. Sliding backwards slightly I threw my left leg out in straight kick. With a tearing sound, sand started flowing out of the side of the bag.

"Not bad, Palmer."

I turned and tried to catch my breath as Forsythe stood watching with an approving look in her eyes. She began unwrapping her hands and nodded to my own upper extremities.

"You might wanna get that checked. There are gloves in the shed for a reason, Palmer."

I looked at my hands and at least two of my fingers were out of place. I hissed slightly as my knuckles began to bruise.

"This place ain't off limits to recruits, Palmer. Try to find some time to come here and work on that right straight."

With that Forsythe turned and walked away, leaving me with my busted hands and a busted punching bag that I now had to take down by myself. Cursing I unhooked the chain and let the bag fall. Using one hand I dragged it to the end of at least four other broken bags and left it there as I headed for the clinic to get lectured by whatever corpsman I got stuck with.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Questions? Comments? Concerns?<strong>

End  
file.